# BECOMING A TEACHER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES – CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

## Mario Pace

*University of Malta (MALTA)*

## Abstract

Becoming a foreign language teacher today does not simply mean developing one's knowledge of and obtaining proficiency in the language one would like to teach, or simply learning how to teach a language. The information and knowledge the language teacher needs to pass on to his/her students does no longer constitute a big challenge in class. In this aspect there is no doubt that technology has definitely taken the upper hand. The language teacher's main priority in class is how to communicate with his students, how to pass on to his students the love and passion for learning the language. This can only be achieved if the teacher succeeds in passing on to his students in class the emotions, the passion of language learning by means of a positive relationship in which the student is not simply a "spectator" in class but becomes the protagonist of that same learning experience. In other words, the biggest challenge in language teaching is the organization and delivery of the teaching and learning materials and how these are applied in class, according to the needs and abilities of the students. In fact language teaching today is influenced by a wide range of individual and sociological factors, namely, second language acquisition theories, the use of technology in the language classroom, curriculum constraints, free movement of individuals from one place to another and from one country to another and the language used in the different media. Furthermore, multi-cultural classrooms have become very common in the 21st century, bringing new challenges and realities for the language teachers. This has, over the years, changed drastically the concept and philosophy of language teaching, making the role (or rather various roles) and duties of any teacher, not least the language teacher, not simply complex but, above all, very demanding. And to be able to respond to these evolving needs, teachers of foreign languages need to, especially during the years of their pre-service training, not just combine theoretical knowledge with practical application through reflective writing but also have the determination and the ability to cope with heterogeneous classrooms in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Teacher training, foreign languages, challenges, perspectives.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is acknowledged that teachers are the school variable that influences the most student achievement (OECD, 2005) [1], and teachers of languages are definitely no exception. In fact teaching is today recognized as one of the most challenging and respected career choices, absolutely vital to the social, cultural, and economic health not just of the students in class but, above all to society in general. Classrooms have become complex arenas where many complex processes co-occur and overlap. Teaching no longer consists primarily of lecturing to students who sit in rows at desks, dutifully listening and recording what they hear, but, rather, it should offer every student a rich, rewarding, and unique learning experience. This has led many teachers to understand that their most important role is to get to know each student as an individual in order to comprehend his or her unique needs, learning style, social and cultural background, interests, and abilities. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) explained, the success of classroom learning is very much dependent on how teachers and students relate to each other, what the classroom environment is, how effectively students cooperate and communicate with each other, and what roles the teacher and learners play [2].

Both aspiring teachers during their teaching practicums as part of their initial teacher training as well as their well-established colleagues, strive to address various challenges and obstacles they face in class. These may vary from social to institutional to personal in their nature and no teacher training programme is sufficient for teachers to overcome all of the challenges encountered in class, which include, amongst others, varied instructional approaches and methodological trends, technological developments and creating a warm classroom climate to provide a non-threatening environment for learning and language acquisition. We live in a period of rapid change and it is no surprise that the words "change" and "innovation" have become *sine qua non* both within and outside the language classroom. Language pedagogy has come a long way since the days when repetitive grammar-

translation methods were regarded as the only way to learn. Today, task-based approaches are widespread, emphasising communication and the practical uses of language with the aim of getting the students excited and interested in languages right from their first language lesson. In other words, teachers have to strive to make languages relevant and interesting and to find a hook to encourage students to take them further.

## 2   PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

Becoming a foreign language teacher today does not simply mean developing one's knowledge of and obtaining proficiency in the language one would like to teach, or simply learning how to teach a language. Today's language teacher is expected to think critically, reflect on the changes in the world and implement the appropriate ones in the class. In order to develop knowledge that will support effective teaching, language teachers need to immerse themselves in the literature of various fields such as psychology, sociology and instructional science amongst others. The information and knowledge the language teacher needs to pass on to his/her students does no longer constitute a big challenge in class. In this aspect there is no doubt that technology has definitely taken the upper hand. The language teacher's main priority in class is how to communicate with his students, how to pass on to his students the love and passion for learning the language. This can only be achieved if the teacher succeeds in passing on to his students in class the emotions, the passion of language learning by means of a positive relationship in which the student is not simply a "spectator" but becomes the protagonist of that same learning experience. In other words, the biggest challenge in language teaching is the organization and delivery of the teaching and learning materials and how these are applied in class, according to the needs and abilities of the students. This has led to a situation where researchers, teachers, agencies, and politicians still cannot agree on a single best way to teach a foreign language. Furthermore, technological innovation and a growing need for learner autonomy are changing the contexts of language learning rapidly and profoundly. Kumaravadivelu (2002) argues that recognition of the current complexity and diversity of these contexts has led to a 'beyond methods' situation and that the quest for a better method should be abandoned in favour of the identification of practices or strategies of teaching designed to reflect local needs and experiences [3].

In the contemporary sphere of teacher training courses, especially in the area of teaching and learning languages, the emphasis is placed on current teaching approaches, introduction of new teaching strategies, the design, planning and delivery of lessons, classroom management techniques, subject content, autonomous learning and more student-centered approaches to teaching. Teaching effectiveness is developed not just through a careful selection of teaching/learning activities and good practice in classrooms, but above all through reflection, especially in the initial stages of teacher training. To become good and effective teachers, student teachers must be reflective practitioners by continually evaluating, not simply the effects of their choices and actions on students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community but also their philosophy and goals in teaching.

Pre-service teacher training should not only play a key role in preparing future teachers of languages to deliver effective lessons to children and young people in education institutions but it should also be a golden opportunity to address both the personal and professional needs of trainee teachers, most of whom are young people who will eventually become important social role models for the learners and communities they serve. The purpose of teacher training is to equip individuals with the personal and professional skills needed in schools and other learning contexts that will enable them to deliver content knowledge, develop skills and foster attitudes that will empower learners to reach their potential [4]. Reflective practice, which is an established but still underexplored feature of teacher education programmes (Korthagen and Vasalos 2005) [5], (Ghaye 2010) [6], can be extremely beneficial in this aspect. Teacher educators should facilitate the reflection process and promote opportunities for student teachers to engage in reflective conversations and reflect on their teaching experiences. Pace (2014) argues that encouraging reflective practice is important for preparing thinking practitioners who show that they can adapt to new technologies, new standards, and new environments [7]. The emphasis on reflective practice is viewed as an attempt to merge theory and practice in teacher education (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007) [8]. Reflection is a highly valued attribute of effective teachers for without the disposition to reflect on their performance, teachers are less likely to improve their practice or to be able to see the links between theory and practice. To enhance competence and improve professional development, teachers must reflect critically on the actions performed in instruction. In fact several studies show that when teachers reflect, they enhance the repertoire of pedagogical knowledge and to do this prospective teachers rely only on cooperating

teachers and university supervisors to provide them with feedback about their work [9]. Reflective teaching means looking at what one does in the classroom, thinking about why s/he does it, and thinking about if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in the classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, the student teacher identifies and explores his/her own practices and underlying beliefs. This should lead to changes and improvements in teaching since, as Wajnryb (1992) says, "it takes a skilled and trained eye to perceive, understand and benefit from observing the proceedings of learning/teaching" [10].

Such a reflection process can also help change pre-service teacher beliefs. It is a known fact that all pre-service teachers have similar beliefs about various issues related to what an effective foreign language teacher should do in class and that such beliefs are strongly influential in how they approach teaching and learning and the way they act in classrooms, especially during their practicum and their first years of teaching. The issue gains even more importance since pre-service teachers usually come to teacher training programs with beliefs they have adopted during their previous schooling experiences as students. The literature indicates that such beliefs persist as filters, and they guide the way that pre-service teachers perceive and interpret the new information presented to them (Borg, 2006) [11]; (Farrell, 1999) [12]. Furthermore, there is evidence indicating that the early-established beliefs pre-service teachers have could become resistant to change over time even if their beliefs are proved to be incorrect or inappropriate during their teacher training (Pajares, 1992) [13]. All this means that the pre service years should help teachers in their struggles with the conflict between their beliefs, their training, the realities of the classroom, the demands of parents and learners and the requirements to demonstrate immediate attainment. (Paran, 2012) [14].

## 3    CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

It stands to reason that, while the evolving trends in foreign language teaching present areas of challenge for all teachers, novice teachers in particular are likely to face unique difficulties linked to the concerns and adaptation problems that emerge during the initial years of teaching.

In today's classrooms, monolingualism seems to be the exception rather than the rule. It is becoming almost impossible to find a classroom in which all students speak the same language. This makes it essential to determine ways of addressing issues that arise with diverse populations and multilingual and multicultural settings within the language classroom. Cultural diversity poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators. Both the teacher and the students bring into the classroom their own personal cultures, institutional cultures, and even cultures from specific social realities, and it is no easy challenge for the teacher to somehow integrate all this into a "class culture" to produce an environment that is conducive to learning. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about how students coming from different countries, backgrounds and life experiences perceive the world and how they process the language/s and intercultural aspects being taught in class. This diversity in the language classroom makes teachers' work difficult and it is only natural that novice teachers find it hard to cater for diversity in the class, leading at times to stress. Culture and gender influence not only our values, beliefs, and social interactions, but also how we view the world, what we consider important, what we attend to, and how we learn and interpret information (Jacobs & Jacobs, 1988) [15], (Irvine, 1990) [16]. This implies that teachers must not only know the learning patterns of the students in their class but must, above all, understand the learning patterns of the students who grew up in a culture other than their own. The Council of Europe in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (CEF) (2001) [17] repeatedly states that teachers should search for more effective international communication with respect for identity and cultural diversity. Dobson (2006) on his part argues that learning to value different languages and those around us help us in the study of new additional ones since they all form part of our global communicative competence [18]. On the other hand however, Clegg and Afitska (2011) show how a lack of fluency in a common language in class may lead to 'creative bilingual practices' in order to enable communication between teachers and learners [19].

In fact language teaching today is influenced by a wide range of individual and sociological factors, namely, second language acquisition theories, the use of technology in the language classroom, curriculum constraints, free movement of individuals from one place to another and from one country to another and the language used in the different media. Furthermore, multi-cultural classrooms have become very common in the 21st century, bringing new challenges and realities for the language teachers. This has, over the years, changed drastically the concept and philosophy of language teaching, making the role (or rather various roles) and duties of any teacher, not least the language teacher, not simply complex but, above all, very demanding. And to be able to respond to these

evolving needs, teachers of foreign languages need to, especially during the years of their pre-service training, not just combine theoretical knowledge with practical application through reflective writing but also have the determination and the ability to cope with heterogeneous classrooms in a multicultural society. This is no easy task especially when novice teachers feel incompetent in class despite having completed their teacher preparation. It is quite common to hear novice teachers complaining about the redundancy of the information presented during preservice teacher training courses and that they feel there exists a gap between theoretical knowledge and practice in class.

Tuffanelli and Ianes (2011) argue that whoever works in schools today feels a certain amount of annoyance and discomfort as a result of the great challenges they face in class when it comes to motivate the students, maintain discipline and create/stimulate adequate learning programmes. They maintain that these challenges are bringing about a "teaching fatigue" being felt by an ever increasing number of teachers in general, not least foreign language teachers [20]. As already mentioned, becoming a foreign language teacher today does not simply mean developing one's knowledge of and proficiency in the target teaching language and learning how to teach a foreign language. Although, as Pachler, Evans and Lawes (2007) state, subject knowledge is the basis of a teacher's professional experience [21], I strongly believe that mastering positive classroom management techniques is a fundamental prerequisite and one of the greatest challenges for today's language teacher. Classroom management problems are one of the major causes of teacher burnout and job dissatisfaction and a topic of enduring concern for teachers. Mollica and Nuessel (2009; 67-68) firmly believe that "the good language teacher fulfills numerous important roles both in and out of the classroom that facilitate optimal second-language learning opportunities". They distinguish between "Out-of-Class Roles" and "In-Class Roles". Amongst the roles that fall under the first category, they mention, for example, doing research, planning, directing and organising, whilst the second category comprises all aspects of classroom management techniques that include not just teaching, but above all motivating, evaluating, facilitating and disciplining [22].

Another important challenge a language teacher has to face is to fill the gap between classroom knowledge and experiential knowledge that can be applied elsewhere. Fragmentary knowledge in class, which may be the result of curricula that give more importance to how much language one knows rather than what can one do with the language s/he knows is a major concern in class and can lead to demotivation and discomfort in students in the language classroom. Teachers today should realise that most students' interest and achievement in language learning improve dramatically when they are helped to make connections between new knowledge and experiences they have had, with real-world contexts or with other knowledge they have already mastered. Given that data and information are readily available with all the information technologies at hand, the teacher should focus more on process and strategies in class to transform learning to useful knowledge (Castillo, 2014) [23]. This also means that the language teacher should strive to help students understand linguistic concepts and forms in a situated and contextualized form. S/he must always be on the look-out for ways and means of transforming simple things used on a daily basis, like songs, food preparation, technology into potential language teaching tools. In other words the teacher must help the students create associations and links with the environment around them to make it the "context" for language teaching, engaging them to acquire language meaningfully, to negotiate meaning and to get their messages through. To do this, language teachers are requested to choose and/or design learning environments that incorporate many different forms of experience in working toward the desired learning outcomes, helping students not simply to discover meaningful relationships between abstract ideas and practical applications in the context of the real world but also to internalise concepts through the process of discovering, reinforcing and relating.

Classroom variables like the teacher him/herself, the curriculum and the learning group can have a tremendous impact on motivation. Various studies show that there is a close connection between the level of students' motivation and variables linked to the learning experience in itself. Nikolov (2001) shows how the students' lack of success in foreign language learning can be the result of the negative perceptions they have of classroom practices [24]. On the other hand Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar and Shohamy (2004) argue that the quality of the teaching programme has a telling effect on the motivation of students studying foreign languages [25]. All this emphasises the fundamental role of the language teacher in class and the importance of motivational teaching practices. As Ruesch, Bown and Dewey (2012, 24-25) put it, the learners' level of motivation is strongly influenced not just by the classroom climate but also by the relationship between teachers and students and consequently language teachers "should focus on setting a positive example, building a solid rapport with students, creating a pleasant relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, and making sure that students understand the tasks in which they are engaging". [26]

This brings us to another big challenge in language teaching that is the organization and delivery of the teaching and learning materials and how these are applied in class, according to the needs and abilities of the students. Effective language teaching and learning can only be achieved through the organised and directed interaction of teachers, learners and materials in the classroom. This is by no means an easy job and becomes even more complex when one considers that such a process has to take place continuously not just with one student but with a whole class of students, all having different abilities, different learning difficulties, different needs and, maybe also having reached different levels in the language being studied. Furthermore, students within the same class learn in different ways, they can learn from a variety of different sources and they may have different goals and objectives in language learning. All this implies that today, the teacher of languages cannot afford to dedicate and concentrate his/her efforts only on what to teach but also, and to a larger extent, more on who the learner is and on the teaching and learning processes. In other words, emphasis is made on how h/she can lead the students to this learning process creating the best environment that is conducive to learning. This can only be successfully achieved if h/she fully understands the complex situations in which some, if not most, of the students live and that often have a telling effect on their levels of attention, motivation and learning. Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) assert that motivation is one of the key factors that determine the rate and success of L2 attainment. [27]

To arrive at this, the teacher has to first and foremost define the students' needs. Sometimes this needs' analysis of the students has to be done on an individual basis. Once the needs of the students are identified, the envisaged learning outcomes can be formulated. Such learning outcomes can vary, not just from one class to another, but also from one student to the other within the same class, given that these should be formulated not just on the basis of the different needs but also on the level of motivation and the predisposition of each student towards the foreign language being studied. And in order to reach the established outcomes, the teacher has to, not simply select carefully the content and notions to present in class but also to plan and organise in detail the methods to adopt in order to create a meaningful and fulfilling learning experience.

There are other challenges language teachers have to face in the today's classrooms. They have the added burden of having to convince students that in today's era, multilingualism has become more than just 'important'. Unfortunately, many young people fail to understand that knowing a foreign language other than one's native language has evolved to be extremely beneficial and that how, whether viewed from the financial or social aspect, being able to communicate in a foreign language helps to make 'real' connection with people and provides a better understanding of one's language. Indeed, in today's European society, multilingualism and interculture play a fundamental role in order to communicate effectively, to extend one's circles beyond the local dimension, to develop an open disposition towards diversity and change and, therefore, also to enhance professional and economic development (Pace, 2015) [28]. Language teachers have to battle the perception among adults and students that learning a foreign language can be an important prerequisite for just a few with the consequence that students in many countries, notwithstanding all the efforts being done in favour of multilingualism, quit to study foreign languages at school. Teachers have to continuously struggle to convince both students and parents that when students are learning a foreign language, it inherently involves learning not only about the language but also about the culture (Kumaravadivelu 2008) [29]. In this respect, the Modern Language Association (2012) affirms in its statement that learning another language 'serves as a portal to the literatures, cultures, historical perspectives, and human experiences that constitute the human record'. And students' perception of the usefulness of the languages they learn can clearly contribute to increasing their motivation which is a key factor in foreign language successful learning. [30]

Lack of exposure to the language being studied presents another challenge to language teachers. It is a known fact that many school aged students prefer chatting and surfing on the net to reading or watching TV programmes in the target language. Just like babies learn to speak a language by hearing and parroting sound, foreign language learners can significantly benefit from practising to listen in order to learn, given that, as stated in the main findings of Eurydice-Eurostat (2012) high exposure to foreign languages facilitates the acquisition of language skills [31]. Teachers of languages must ensure that their students get a certain amount of exposure to the language, and that this exposure is consistent, continuous and rich. Listening and speaking are the communicative skills students use most in daily life, yet they can be the most difficult to practise unless one lives in a foreign country or attends immersive language classes. Given that the key element in learning to speak a language is the need to communicate it follows that language teachers have to find ways how to immerse their students in an environment where the need for the target language is felt so that they are compelled to use the new language for real communication. Johnstone (2003) on his part argues

that progression in language learning is dependent on a range of variables that go from social factors, like exposure and status, to process factors, including the teaching/learning/interaction, to individual/group factors, which include the aptitude, the motivation and the learning style in both teachers and students [32]. This implies that according to Johnstone, progression could be improved if teachers provide the right opportunities for learners to "acquire understanding of the grammatical structures of the language; to expand their vocabulary beyond the basics; to marshal and re-use existing language knowledge in new and wider-ranging situations; to take the initiative, ask questions, offer comments, justify opinions; and more generally, to develop independence in tackling and completing learning tasks" (Hunt et al 2005: 3) [33].

## 4 CONCLUSION

Today's society has witnessed social, political and economic changes over a very short span of time. With regards to foreign language teaching, one of the most challenging changes was the onset of multi-cultural classrooms that have become characteristic of the 21st century, bringing new challenges and realities for the language teachers. To be better able to meet these changes, a large number of countries have moved from a system of foreign language teaching designed to educate just a few to one of mass education and this required a transformation in the meaning and the orientation of the work of language teachers. Such rapid and profound social changes have not only increased the number of foreign language teachers and students and brought about complex and intriguing problems related to quality in teaching and learning, but they have also deeply affected present-day teaching methods and approaches. In today's world, if foreign language teaching is to be successful, it is important that teaching systems and programmes are continuously remodelled. To be able to respond to these evolving needs, foreign language teachers need to achieve very high standards in their teaching and to do this they need to combine theoretical knowledge with practical application. Teachers of foreign languages need not only possess knowledge and research tools, but above all the ability to cope with heterogeneous classrooms in a multicultural society. All this makes teaching foreign languages today a much more difficult and challenging profession but at the same time much more fulfilling and rewarding. And success can only be achieved by means of creative thought and determination.

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